

Merrill 120, Personal Empowerment

Winter 2017

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Fall quarter office hours: Mon and Wed from 12:00 to 4:00 for in-person.

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Feel free to email or phone me at home at 423-0969.

The course is offered winter quarter, MWF from 4:00 to 5:30. I'll let you know in what room once the powers that be make that decision.

This is a cross-disciplinary course on: Personal Empowerment, General Problem-Solving, Psychological Unblocking, Creativity, Goals, Creating Community, Wisdom, Meaning and Richness in Life, . . .

Much of this course is devoted to individual goal-oriented behavior, or what is often called problem-solving. How people identify, take on, and move through their psychological problems will be considered through intensive personal scrutiny, exercises, and reading, both in class and outside. The purpose of the course is for us to experience more control over our lives, to choose and solve problems which lead to our own long-term satisfaction and to the enrichment of our society, and to create and experience community and mutual support. The course is of professional value for people who plan to be counselors, teachers, administrators, problem-solvers, or who wish to cultivate their joy, satisfaction, and creativity.

The following topics will receive special focus: Problems, purposes, and goals; Meaning in life; The origin and cultivation of emotions; Languages, model-building, and reality; Thinking and creativity; Romantic and other relationships, The steps of solving

problems; Common blocks and techniques of unblocking; What's it all for, and how do you experience love, gratitude, caring, community, concern, delight, enthusiasm, joy, sensitivity, surrender, and wonder in the process of it all.

READINGS: These two books are available from the Bay Tree Bookstore or from Amazon: *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg, which is about writing, and *Meetings at the Edge*, by Stephen Levine, which is about death and dying. I don't exactly call them required readings, as you can choose not to read one or both of them. Do know that students have raved about both of these ever since I adopted them as required texts several decades ago. I suggest that you read them over Christmas break.

In addition, there are two required readings, both by me. The first is *The Art and Practice of Loving*, which is available from heartfeltyes.com. The email version is free from them, and a very nice paperback version is available from them for about \$12. The second reading I've tentatively titled *Choice by Choice - Living Our One Precious Life*. I'm currently in the eternal (22 years so far) process of rewriting it. When we turn our attention to it I will email it to you.

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY: If this course leaves you with the habit of self-examination and gives you powerful tools for that examination, it will have proved one of your most valuable classes. Use all the work, the reading, whatever happens in class, how you respond to anything in your life throughout the term, as grist for the mill of the course. The responsibility for the outcome is yours. You may well find yourself bored, triumphant, angry, disgusted, excited, whatever, by things that happen in class, in the reading, or in the exercises assigned. Just notice how you are reacting and go ahead and do the assignments and share your thoughts and experiences with all of us! Use the class and this term

as a microcosm of how you run your life. Learn from whatever happens.

DO THE WORK OF THE CLASS, WHETHER YOU WANT TO OR NOT. People stop themselves from growing and succeeding by giving away their power in favor of what they want or don't want. It's OK not to want to do the work of the course, but do it anyway and don't fight it. Confront the barriers and distractions that will come up. Maybe you can learn to like/love things you dislike at first.

READING: I will announce when the readings will be due. Be sure you have read them by then. If I distribute a handout in class, please read it by the class meeting after it is handed out. Be sure you get the reading done by the deadlines. This is a course in overcoming blocks. So when you come up against your habitual blocks push through them. We could build a whole course around any one of the books, and many of the ideas and practices take effect only after months or years of practice. Remember that the value of this experience is not measured by where you are ten weeks from now, but by the quality of your life and your relationships and what you accomplish in the years ahead.

The assignment when reading is not the usual understanding or remembering of the material. It is to read each reading by the date due with the strong aim to get what you can from it. Note that is not to judge, evaluate, agree, disagree, or criticize. Watch how you use negative judgments of parts of a book, or of an author's style (e.g., don't like it, jargon, sexist language, old fashioned, etc.) to write off the author as a loser with nothing to say to you. Know that everything life offers you will have its negative features as well as its positive. Learn more than just from the content of the readings - learn about yourself from your response to the readings. If you get judgmental about class, how can you make that into a growth opportunity (called an AFGO, another fucking growth opportunity)? Are you willing to bring it up in class?

If you have time over December break, I suggest that you read either *Writing Down the Bones* or *Meetings at the Edge* or both of them before the winter quarter starts. Quite a few students end up taking incompletes in the course because of the work load. And spring term is no time to be finishing up work from winter!

JOURNAL: Huge numbers of people have found that keeping a self-reflective journal is, by itself, a way to transform their life. The journal that is part of the course is an important part of the experience. As you do the readings, as or after you do exercises in class or out of class, as you reflect on the events of your life, write your reflections in your journal. Write almost every day — by so doing you will create a relationship with journaling that is far more powerful than what you would get from, say, weekly journaling. Your journal is a scratch copy; don't re-write anything just to turn it in, regardless of the mess. If you want to make changes, leave the first version, so you can still read it, and make the changes someplace else. The journal should be a complete record of your work and written reflections arising out of the total course experience. Please begin keeping it immediately.

I want to read your journals. This will motivate you to do and reflect on the work of the course. This is hard motivation to come by in our society. Usually people care only about how many points students get on exams. Please give me the new pages you have written as you write them, i.e., at most of the class meetings (and at the very least every week). [Note: If there are parts you don't want me to read, either write a note to that effect at the top of the page(s) of private material, or tape or staple another sheet over the private areas. I will make no attempt to read what you don't want me to, and I will respect the confidentiality of all the material in your journal.] I intend to return your pages to you at the next class meeting after I get them. I may write comments on some of them, and I may just put a check mark to indicate I read it. If you want comments on particular parts, request them and I will be sure

to write them. You are likely to find that reading through your journal from time to time is a rewarding process.

WHAT TO WRITE? The first rule is write anything, but write. "You cannot stray — the path bends with your feet." Go for quantity. Watch perfectionism block you from getting started. And learn from it and overcome it. Watch yourself procrastinate. And learn how you do it and overcome it. Never beat yourself up for writing anything. Date what you write. When you finish and read something over, you might write, "When I read this over, I feel — —." Dialogues are good to write, e.g., regarding any problem. Write out a dialogue with the problem, or with yourself, or with any other person(s) involved, or with society or events or your body. Sitting at the notebook (or keyboard) with pen (or keyboard) in hand draws things out of you that you wouldn't guess were there. You can consciously choose the orientation of your writing to draw out what you want. I will assign writings from time to time. Be guided by Natalie Goldberg's book, *Writing Down the Bones*, which is a superb metaphor for living.

One last suggestion. People tend to write about events and their feelings about events. Their style suggests there is a mechanical connection between the two - that we are here on earth to go through a set of motions dictated by circumstances, feeling the way the circumstances dictate. Life, however, offers more than that.

The Whiskered Guru, by Frank Andrews

The cat snores softly;

I ask him/her, "Why are we here?"

S/he yawns and stretches.

(Sorry that English pronouns are all gendered.) What do you think s/he meant by this answer? When I wrote the poem, I assumed that everyone would read it the way I did, but that is by no means the case. (One former student tattooed that haiku on her body, to give you a sense of how much people can create out of all this.)

A powerful strategy for turning your life into a learning, growing process is to live life deliberately as a process of discovery and intention. So in concluding a journal entry, ask yourself, "What can I learn from this?" You can learn about yourself, others, and the world from anything. What it takes to learn is the determination to learn. You can practice scanning events and your response to them with the strong will to see lessons. Thus you "discover" the lessons in life (Or maybe you "create" them. It makes no difference.) Each of us lives a life that is incredibly rich in lessons, tailored precisely for us.

Words can be more than just talking about something. Certain words are actions, not symbols. If you promise something, commit to something, the act of saying or writing the promise is the promising, or at least the formalizing of the commitment. So couple your discovery statements with intention statements. These don't have to be big intentions. Make them specific and checkable: "I will strike up a conversation with one new person before I go to bed tonight." "I will pass up dessert at dinner." Mark your intention statements so you can quickly find them later, to see if you held to them. If you did, then acknowledge yourself for your success. If you didn't, then use that as an opportunity to learn, and recommit - not as an opportunity to beat yourself up.

FIVE PROBLEM AREAS: Immediately choose five problem areas or issues in your life that you want to focus on throughout the course. These will give you concrete directions for applying the generalities from the reading and class. I've listed below a few of the problem areas some people have used, just to stimulate your thinking. List genuine problems or goals of yours. Choose the most important ones in your life right now.

ASSIGNMENT: Bring a list of your problems to the second meeting of the class. By a week into the quarter, write out and turn a thorough statement of each of the problem areas.

It will be most useful if you choose a variety, since techniques appropriate to one kind are not necessarily useful with another. These areas might relate to academic, social, or romantic or sexual life, to family, job, leisure-time, money, physical health, or vaguer areas of concern, anxiety, stress, or challenge. You are likely to find that you will work a lot on some of these areas, not much on others, and that new areas arise to occupy you during some of the term. Examples:

Changing a Habit. Being late, overeating, over-smoking, over-drinking, under-studying, speaking too much or too little, under-exercise, procrastinating, quitting, failing, sexual performance, excessive drugs, unpleasant to others, particular relationships bad. These often represent conflicts between long-term and short-term motives.

Communication Problems. Hiding truths, unassertive, resentful.

Unwanted Feelings. Depression, anger, anxiety, tension, shame, boredom, pressure, worthlessness, meaninglessness, fear, guilt, ugliness, unlovableness, futility, embarrassment.

Unclear Motives. What am I doing here, what to major in, how to spend leisure time.

Skill Problems. Coursework, music performance, paper-writing, mathematics, chess, baseball, taking examinations, getting money, loneliness, coping with changes (like leaving home), time pressure.

Relationship Problems. Parent, roommate, sibling, romantic partner, friend, child, other relative, coworker, boss, teacher, employee, pupil.

Others. Something you want to have, to become, to change, to affect, to do, to experience.

Success in this course will depend on your willingness to work at the (extensive) assignments and to share your insights and frustrations in class and in writing. Assignments and exercises are likely to cover a wide spectrum including the interesting and relevant, the boring and irrelevant, and the downright obnoxious. All will be valuable grist for the course, which is designed to heighten your self-awareness while you learn to make self-awareness a tool for life-long growth. BUT just changing one of your understandings could transform your life!

You can expect to probe your own motives for all aspects of your life and for your future plans. You can expect to do a lot of reflecting and journal writing. You should plan to give this course the 15 or more hours per week that would represent 1/3 of your course load this term. You can expect your normal ways of responding to stimuli to be challenged so you experience greater personal control over the quality of your life and over your actions.

Class meetings will be directed by the instructor. They won't be typical seminar meetings in which the game is to kick ideas around. Our game is our mutual growth. They won't be encounter groups in which people emote at each other and are left raw. There will certainly be emotions expressed during class meetings, but they will be grist for our mill of self-observation. Join the class only if you will be here to support each others' growth. I intend to bring emotions to closure by the end of each class and use them for the growth of us all. The personal nature of the course makes evaluation of student progress difficult. I dislike having to assign letter grades for this course. Narrative evaluations will be based on the journal, class participation, and your own self-evaluation. The narrative evaluation can not possibly capture the most important elements of the experience.

Feel free to phone me at home, 423-0969. My home is at 1025 Laurent, located 2 blocks toward the bay on Laurent off of High

Street, or 2 blocks up Laurent off of Escalona. House with a large red mailbox and red front door, and often a red Prius in the driveway.

Contract of Agreements

Human interactions are generally conducted under sets of agreements designed to benefit all the people involved. Usually we don't make those agreements explicit. Thus, different people have different senses of what the agreements are. This can lead to trouble. In our culture people don't appreciate the importance to their lives of making clear agreements and then keeping them, whether they want to or not. Often we go along in the spirit that if you don't mention my broken agreements, I won't mention yours. We've not been taught to abide by, argue for, and believe in OUR decisions. We play social and business games, but refuse to play them wholeheartedly. So we hold back and sabotage ourselves.

How do agreements work? When we are in touch with our motivation for some enterprise, we willingly agree to all sorts of things. But later, when out of touch with that motivation, we don't recreate the feeling that led to making the agreement in the first place. Then to what do we give allegiance? What is the final arbiter of our behavior? Too often we let that be our immediate feelings or our wants. When we are lost in the seas of circumstances, feelings, and wants, the only rudder we have to keep on course is the fact that we gave our word. We made an agreement, either with our self and/or with someone else. So we can let the final arbiter be our word, our commitment. By strengthening the power of our word, we stay on purpose and give our life thrust and direction.

This course is conducted under an explicit set of agreements. Each person's keeping all of these agreements is essential for full benefit to be realized by everyone.

1. I freely choose to be in this course, and take that choice seriously and am responsible for keeping my contract of agreements.
2. I embrace the purpose of the course as the personal empowerment of every member of the course. I will work hard to assure my own growth and will support all members in their own. I agree to ask for support in keeping my agreements and to give that support to other participants.
3. I will attend all class meetings, on time, and stay until class is over. Class is scheduled for a full 110 minutes, and Frank intends to end each class by the scheduled ending time. If it is after that time and the class is still going on and I have another pressing activity, I am free to leave.
4. I will bring paper or a notebook to class.
5. I will notify Frank and/or the class in advance about any previous commitment of overriding importance which I choose to honor, rather than attending class.
6. I will notify Frank and/or the class immediately of emergencies which prevent my attending class. I will do this responsibly, aware that I have agreed to attend and my absence will make a difference to everyone.
7. If I miss all or part of any class, by the next class I will find out the details of what happened from another class member and learn and complete any assignments that were made.
8. I will treat what people share in class as private communications, never to be disclosed outside class in a form that could lead to identification of the sharer with his/her communication.

9. I will do the assignments when assigned. That includes keeping the journal on most days and turning it in regularly, at least once a week.

10. At the end of term, I will write a thoughtful retrospective reflection on my experiences and growth from taking the course.

11. I will handle whatever complaints I may have by communicating them to the person best able to do something about the situation. If about the class, this is likely to be Frank. If about some class member, it is that person. I agree not to complain or criticize to someone who can't do something about it.

12. I agree to be responsible for my own emotions and feelings in this class, and not to blame them on others. I agree to create value for myself and others out of what happens.

13. I acknowledge that there will be no guests or visitors to this class, other than (very unlikely) people Frank may invite to come as professionals.

14. There will be no final exam in this class. There might be a final meeting held outside the schedule.

15. I will take risks and expose my secret and embarrassing problems - in the writing exercises and verbally in class - rather than play it safe and hide my natural human attributes from myself and others. I will support others in doing the same.

16. If I break my agreements, I will use that to examine the role of agreements and commitment in my life, to look at what it means to be committed, and to see who is responsible for what I do and don't do.

Here are the many assignments we'll be undertaking. You may want to start practicing one or more of these right now, without waiting to find out whether you've been admitted to the course.

These Assignments Will Be Introduced as We Go Along:

1. Remember your contract of agreements, re-read that contract.
2. Learn the name of everyone in class.
3. Complete the written time survey, 7 consecutive days, every 15 minutes, what were you doing, what was the quality of your experience, what (thoughts) were you telling yourself to create that? How were you approaching life? What did you believe or "know" about yourself and the situation? Do you repeat low times? How do you do that? High times, if so, how? How much do you get done? How much did you study? Recreation? Socialization? Did you enjoy these? How do you attend to your body? Your life consists of weeks just like this, one after another. What have you learned from this exercise? Do you care to make any commitments?
4. Personal commitment not to beat yourself up until the end of the last class meeting. This commitment may mean working to change a deeply entrenched habit. You can go a long way toward changing a habit during a few weeks of real intention and hard work. I challenge you to take yourself and your life seriously enough to work hard this quarter to become your own friend and supporter, rather than your own saboteur and abuser. What could be more important?
5. Early in the quarter, turn in your list of "five problem areas, with some description/journaling of each. Take each area in turn and write it up, at a pace that works for you, explaining how you do (perpetuate) the issue. Attend to how, not to the stories of why, all that stuff in your past that you can blame for this issue. Look for choice points, i.e., openings for changing your habitual approach regarding this issue.
6. One-on-one sharing of one of the most important issues for you with a partner in the class. We will amplify this assignment later.
7. Pick one major issue of long standing in your life, one that has real emotional content. Write the equivalent of from 3 to 4 double-spaced pages typed in first person, presenting the deep voices in your head, the feeling tone, the emotional content, the pain. Put

time into this, and honor the potential of this exercise. We will pair up and meet one on one outside of class to read these to each other. The reading will be in this format: The first person will read through their paper out loud from start to end, then go back and read it through again, then again, etc. Do not deviate from what you have written. Let whatever emotions and feelings come up as they want to. The listener, simply listen with compassion, but do not make comments that will distract the reader from what they are reading. Read for at least 60 minutes, preferably for 90 minutes. When the first person has completed, it is the other person's turn.

8. At least three times each week, have a great day. Pick a day in advance and make it into a great one.

9. Ask a favor of someone you would not normally ask for one. If this is at all hard for you, do it often, several times a week.

10. Decline someone's request of a favor from you. If this is at all hard for you, do it every week until the end of term. You can remember Miss Manners' never-fail way to decline a request, "I'm sorry but I'm afraid that will just be impossible." You don't owe people any reasons for saying no.

11. Whatever you have loaned to others - property, money, books, go after them and get them back. If you choose not to do so, then in your mind, turn those loans into voluntary gifts on your part. Give back property and money you have borrowed (or stolen) from others.

12. Have a meaningful interaction with someone with whom you would not normally have such an interaction. Do this at least three times weekly to start, then do it daily.

13. Acknowledge or compliment someone you would not normally do this with. Do this at least once a week for the duration of the course. Accept compliments (e.g., "Thank you.") And let them into your awareness.

14. Appreciate your past, self-acknowledgment, Practice 123 in the Loving book: Journal extensively listing many events, activities,

experiences, projects, that you have been responsible for. Include differences you have made to other people, animals, and plants. Times you have been a caretaker, a cause. Experiences you have created for yourself and for others. This list might help you remember items to include: (1) people, (2) quality of your own life, (3) your body, (4) use of resources that were in your control, (5) accomplishments/learnings, (6) ideas, (7) skills, (8) the world, (9) spiritual growth, (10) whatever else. Include times you have let others have the joy and satisfaction of serving you. We will have these journals to refer to when we do a paired exercise in which you will share what is magnificent about yourself with a partner, and get to hear your partner do the same.

15. Listen to your voices: As preparation for a remarkable exercise: Pick a problem area and journal the many negative voices that help keep you locked into the habitual issue. Imagine yourself stating a commitment to dissolve this problem area (either as a generality or a specific part of the problem area) and listen to the familiar voices that come to mind saying you cannot do it, and write them down. Journal how you would answer each voice to take its power away. We will share these in class. Then we will do the listening to your voices exercise.

16. If you have a hard time speaking up in groups/classes: speak up in this class at least once a week (beyond when we are just going around the circle), preferably more, and speak up gratuitously in at least one of your other classes at least once a week. You can push past those familiar voices that tell you that your idea has already been said, that someone else could say it better than you, that it is not on topic, that it will take the focus away from the person we are focusing on at the moment. You don't have to raise your hand - you can simply butt in - even if that feels like rude. The world will not collapse if someone, even the instructor, thinks you are being pushy. We want to hear from you. Believe it or not, your voice wants to be heard.

17. People who have an easy time speaking up in groups/classes: Pay attention to the dynamic of the class discussion. Is there someone in category 16 above who might talk if you wait? Ask yourself if your contribution actually furthers the discussion or if it is a digression. If another person is the center of the discussion at the moment, ask yourself if your comment keeps the focus on that person or diverts it to you. Do this without getting all tied up in knots, because we do want to hear from you.

18. Read the books by the times determined. More on this as we learn more about availability. As you go along, but certainly before the end of term, as part of your journaling, give your comments on each of the books. Be sure to highlight that section of journaling so I will realize this is what you are doing and thus check this part of the assignment off for you.

19. Physical appearance: We will assign: Spend 15 minutes looking at your face in the mirror. Remember your commitment not to beat your self up, but to support yourself instead. Spend 15 minutes looking in a mirror at your whole body clothed. Spend 15 minutes looking in a mirror at your whole body without clothes. Is that body "you?" If so, who chose to say "yes?" Who is doing the looking? Then do Practice 119 in the Loving book. Are you willing to give up criticizing your body - for how it looks? For how it functions? In what ways does your body function well for you? How grateful to it might you be? Are you willing to appreciate it instead of criticizing it? To thank it? To express love to it? To take care of it and to delight in it?

20. With whom do you need to communicate? Perhaps to tell someone how their actions have affected you, to ask for an apology, to offer an apology, express a feeling or emotion, to clarify something, to end a warring relationship, to conclude a relationship cleanly. As you think back through your life, you might find a number of these. The assignment is to do it, to make the communication, provided doing so will not cause still further upset, especially upset by you. If you are frustrated because the person

has died or you don't know how to contact them, we can talk about that in class. It might help to begin by drafting several letters to the person, each written from a different voice in your mind or a different point of view about that person. It often helps to write an emotionally over-dramatized presentation of a single point of view. These drafts are not for communication, but for clarification on your part, to enable you to actually make a useful communication, and to help bring peace to this issue.

21. *Gratitude Practice*: Develop the practice, indeed the habit, of living in a context of thankfulness. Let "Thank you, God," or else just plain "Thank you" be the mantra of your psycho-spiritual practice. The benefits from this practice are just beginning to be recognized in Western cultures that are non-spiritual, and people are realizing how amazingly powerful the practice is. We'll be talking together about this throughout the quarter.